

Patent Application of
Daniel Roy Schlee
for

TITLE: PROMOTIONAL DATA DELIVERY SYSTEM AND METHOD

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/266,515 filed February 5, 2001, the contents of which are hereby incorporated by reference.

BACKGROUND—FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates generally to promotional data delivery systems and methods and particularly to a system and method whereby a host, consumers and promoters are in communication for the purposes of distributing promotional data to targeted consumers.

BACKGROUND-DESCRIPTION OF THE PRIOR ART

Promotional material delivery systems generally and, coupon distribution systems in particular, are a common part of the American consumer field. Whether broadcast delivery via newspaper inserts or weekly mailers or targeted delivery via point-of-sale printing based on a last purchased item or via electronic coupons based on a last contacted website or e-commerce purchase, the field has yet to efficiently relate manufacturing and retailing promoters with desirous and receptive prospective customers in a dynamic and secure fashion.

Generally, manufacturers and retailers issue coupons to increase sales, reduce inventory and enhance brand loyalty. While coupons are delivered to consumers through a variety of media, the majority of coupons are distributed via pull-out sections in newspapers, which are also known as free-standing inserts. Although it is the most common means of coupon delivery, of those coupons distributed via free-standing inserts, only a very small percentage (2%) are redeemed. Other methods of distribution that often experience redemption rates higher than free-standing inserts include in-store shelf coupon dispensers, check-out or point-of-sale coupons, register receipt coupons, in-product coupons, instant peel-off on-product coupons and direct mail coupons.

Manufacturers and retailers expend significant resources on a cost-per-redeemed-coupon basis using existing systems. Participative consumers spend significant time in coupon

management and usage. There remains a need for a system and method of promotional data delivery that concurrently allows manufacturers and retailers to target consumers that are likely to be desirous of the promotional material and likely to use the material when received, to reduce the consumer time wasted in repeated hunting, selecting, sorting, and gleaning of coupons as they manage and apply their coupon portfolio, and to require minimal changes in retailers' business practice to implement.

U.S. Pat. No. 5,907,830 to Engel et al. discloses an electronic coupon distribution system providing on-line coupon information for a potential consumer, using a personal computer connected to a host computer, thereby to search and select available coupons and download and securely print the selected coupons with a printer connected to the potential consumer's personal computer. An alternative embodiment has the host computer recording information obtained from the potential consumer for marketing purposes. Engle further discloses the system may automatically direct coupons satisfying the potential consumer's preferences to the consumer when the coupons become available. The invention discloses that by using information provided by the potential consumer and the requests consumers make for coupons, a mailing list may be compiled.

U.S. Pat. No. 6,237,145 to Narasimhan, et al. discloses a system for accessing and displaying promotional information and for generating redeemable coupons based on at least one

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of the accessed promoting stores' promotional information records, each of which includes an electronic coupon offer and information in connection with a product or service a merchant offers. The system also stores a customer profile for a system user that includes user preference information. The stored records are presented according to a hierarchical menu structure. The user navigates menus to select promotional information records for presentation. The user electronically clips the coupon offer of the presented record and the electronic clipped coupon is stored. At the merchant, the electronic clipped coupon is accessed and reviewed, and a paper coupon corresponding to the electronic clipped coupon is selectively generated for redemption by the merchant.

U.S. Pat. No 6,321,208 to Barnett, et al. discloses a method and system similar to Engel with coupons selected in bulk for downloading by the user's personal computer and printing from the downloaded file selected coupons on a printer connected to the user's personal computer. An online service provider conceptually takes the place of Engel's host computer.

While the prior art summarized above attempts to provide efficient coupon delivery systems and methods in their own right, they do not permit the detailed consumer targeting of the coupon-using consumer by the manufacturers and retailers, and do not exploit the customer friendly secure means of coupon delivery via mail and other parcel delivery services.

An object of the present invention is the relating of promoters' promotion data with consumer data and thereby providing promotional data to customers likely to act on the received promotional data via secure and customer-friendly means such as postal delivery. An additional object of the present invention is to allow a participating manufacturer to select criteria in detail sufficient enough to support the screening of the types of prospective customers it wishes to receive its coupons or other promotional material. An additional object of the present invention is to track successive coupon distributions to minimize the targeted prospective customers receipt of duplicate coupons. An additional object of the present invention is that while the prospective customer has active roles in entering demographic data and selecting coupons, the customer will be sent coupons resulting from relational processing by the host computer of the manufacturers' and retailer's inputs with those of the receiving customer.

SUMMARY

The present invention provides a system and method by which promoters can stipulate their preferred customer criteria, customers can provide profiling information and the host can relate the promoters' and customers' data to provide or otherwise communicate, preferably in tangible form such as paper via mail or parcel delivery services, promotional information including coupons particularly targeted for the prospective customers. In practicing the present invention, manufacturers and retailers select their respective target

audiences from the host's database of consumer data. In practicing the present invention, the customers subscribe to the services of the host by submitting a demographic profile and may select to receive particular coupons. Also in practicing the present invention, the promoters participate by authorizing and submitting promotional data parameters, and can select and prioritize consumer data as a targeted audience. The host may also obtain consumer data by other means including third-party surveys. The host relates the promotional data directions of the promoters with the consumer data, and thereby provides the resulting promotional data to the customer. The means of communication can be varied including postal service or other parcel delivery services, telefacsimile, wireless transmission, the Internet, or other means.

An advantage of the present invention includes efficiently directed promotional material delivered to receptive customers in a secure distributed system requiring minimal changes in the retailers' business practices in order to implement. An additional advantage of the present invention is that it minimizes manufacturers' coupon fraud by using physical delivery systems instead of exclusively printing at the sites of targeted customers. An additional advantage of the present invention is the process of receiving and relating demographic data, purchase history, product preferences and other data provided by the participating customers to efficiently reach the targeted audience to maximize rates of redemption.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 illustrates a functional block diagram of the promotional data distribution system of the present invention.

FIG. 2 illustrates a flowchart of the present invention.

FIG. 3 illustrates a detailed flowchart of the customer login of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

In order to practice the present invention, the customers subscribe to the services of the host by submitting a demographic profile and in addition the host may obtain consumer data by any other means. The promoters participate by authorizing and submitting promotional data parameters and can select and prioritize consumer data as a targeted audience. The host relates the promoters' promotional data criteria with the customers' data, and thereby provides the resulting promotional data to the customer. The means of communication can be varied including postal service or other parcel delivery services, telefacsimile, wireless transmission, the Internet, or other means. The preferred embodiment of the present invention uses a distributed network, such as the Internet, with the means of secure delivery of coupons being paper coupons delivered by first class mail or other means acceptable to the promoter.

Illustrated in FIG. 1 is the promotional data distribution system 100 of the present invention including a host, consumers and promoters that are in electrical communication via a distributed network such as the Internet 140. The host is represented by a general purpose computing system 130 for storing the Promotional Data Delivery system software and processing the input and output requests of both consumers and promoters. The host computing system comprises a central processing unit, CPU 133, that provides the primary processing functionality for the management system of the present invention. The CPU 133 is coupled to memory 132, which may include random access memory or read only memory, as well as non-volatile memory 134 such as disk storage or equivalent means of retaining information in computer readable form. Host computer system input and output 150 to the Internet 140 are provided by the input/output (I/O) device 131 that preferably includes connecting means with high capacity data transfer rates such as a T1 connection, for example, and can include one or more digital subscriber lines (DSLs), one or more dial-up or cable modems, and wireless connections. One or more host printing devices 135 are electronically accessible by the host computing system 130 for generating promotional materials. The host printing devices are secured such that the host computing system 130 has exclusive access to the host printing devices 135.

The host computing system 130 is accessible by consumers each having a general-purpose computer 110 as illustrated. The computer 110 may be desktop, laptop, personal digital

assistant (PDA), mobile phone or an Internet-enabled appliance or the equivalent. The computer 110 supports standard communication protocols comprising Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP), Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions (MIME), Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP), and Mobile IP. The CPU 111 also provides the functional support for an Internet browser or other type of graphical user interface (GUI) at the consumer display 113, a computer monitor for example, through which the consumer interacts with the host computer. The computer uses Internet browsers. Typical Internet browsers operable with the computer 110 include products sold under the trademarks of MICROSOFT® INTERNET EXPLORER®, NETSCAPE® and MOSAIC®. The I/O 112 may include a keyboard, a pointing device (e.g., a mouse, a track ball, a pen device, or the like) as well as the hardware and software necessary to support communication between the consumer and the Internet, and may include a conventional dial-up modem, cable modem, (DSL) or wireless interface in conjunction with an Internet service provider. The browser typically provides a GUI having a pointer that may be maneuvered about a screen to select various graphical icons to invoke features of the Internet browser. The graphical icons may represent, for example, hyperlinks to various uniform resource locators (URL) or pull down menus, such as a file menu or a bookmark menu, for interfacing with the Internet and the Internet browser. The one or more consumer computing systems may also have electronic access to printing devices.

The host computing system 130 is also accessible by one or more promoters with a computing system such as the general-purpose computer 120 illustrated. A promoter refers generally to a promoter, a manufacturer, a retailer, a brand name, a vendor or a supplier of goods or services for which consumers may request, solicit, order or otherwise receive promotional materials including coupons, discounts, mail-in rebates, sweepstakes, giveaways, or any other data promoting the promoter or its products. The computer 120 supports standard communication protocols such as HTTP, MIME, TCP/IP, and Mobile IP. The CPU 121 also provides the primary functional support for an Internet browser or other type of GUI at vendor display 123, a computer monitor or equivalent, through which the vendor interacts with the host computer 130. The computer uses Internet browsers. Typical Internet browsers operable with the CPU 121 include products sold under the trademarks of MICROSOFT® INTERNET EXPLORER®, NETSCAPE® and MOSAIC®. The I/O 122 includes the hardware and software necessary to support communication between the consumer computer and the Internet, and may include a conventional modem, cable modem, DSL or wireless interface in conjunction with an Internet service provider. The one or more promoter computing systems may also have electronic access to printing devices.

Referring to the flowchart of Fig. 2, the Promotional Data Delivery system of the present invention, including distinct interfaces for both promoters and consumers, is illustrated. From the promoter computer, a promoter accesses the host computer system by promoter interfacing

means including a secure, password-protected web page referred to as the promoter main page 201. From the promoter main page 201 the promoter provides identifying information such as account number and password to login 202 to the individual promoter's interface. Upon logging in, the promoter is presented with the defining means and inputting means of "ClientTools" 203, or HyperText Markup Language (HTML) links, through which the promoter may initially define, edit or modify information stored at the host computer. In the preferred embodiment, all downloads from the host computer system 130, including those that support the input of information, are preferably constructed in the form of HTML documents and forms, and provided to the vendor or consumer over the World-Wide Web (WWW) using HTTP.

Using the ClientTools 203 is, in the preferred embodiment, the primary hub through which the promoter is provided access to create 204 and modify 205 each of the functional elements necessary to define or edit Targeted Consumer Profiles (TCP) 207, promotional materials (PM) 208, products 209, brand name items 210, and other data. The information of the TCP 207, PM 208, products 209, brands 210 and other data are stored to and retrieved from the host computer and subsequently used to provide content for the consumer interface as well as promotional materials to be delivered to the consumer.

The ClientTools 203 may further comprise defining means for a promoter to input additional information, including:

1. choice of distributing a coupon, discount, mail-in rebates, sweepstakes, giveaway, or any other data promoting the promoter or its products;
2. Text/images regarding the promoter;
3. Promoter's assigned UCC code;
4. Text/images regarding each unique product;
5. Unique Product UCC code;
6. Text regarding product Ingredients;
7. Nutritional Facts data;
8. Brand names;
9. Product description;
10. Product size (US standard measurement, metric, quantity);
11. Products associated with a coupon;
12. Zip Code Regions where data will be delivered (currently 100, the first 2 digits of U.S. ZIP Codes, but this could be expanded to exact 5-digit ZIP Codes, ZIP+4 and the like);
13. Value of a coupon can have a unique value assigned for a Zip Code Region;
14. Maximum value that can be placed on the coupon (for situations where the value code does not have a specific "cents-off" amount);
15. Coupon Family Code;
16. Coupon Offer Code;
17. "DO NOT DOUBLE" (yes/no)
18. Indication whether the coupon is a "Manufacturer Coupon" or "Military Coupon."; and
19. Other items requested by the promoter.

The promoter, upon finishing all necessary work with the ClientTools 203 in this session, can Logout 213 from the main menu.

All activity performed with the ClientTools 203, including Login 202 and Logout 213, are recorded in the host database 260, along with the Modifier's unique ID. This provides a factual history of activity and can be used to confirm what changes were made, when the changes were made, and who made the changes. Additionally, an email or other type of notification will also be generated automatically by transmission means and forwarded to the promoter, data entry person, or other interested party; this notification by the transmission means is an acknowledgement (receipt) of the activity.

The TCP 207 includes a subroutine for distributing the promotional materials to consumers that receive the PM 208 Promotional Data Delivery 200 as defined by the present invention. A promotion can be selected from the list of items previously defined at PM 208. The promoter is prompted to select consumer criteria and input information into the Selection Criteria 211 for the purpose of retrieving consumers who match the criteria. As part of the inputting means of Select Criteria 211, the promoter defines one or more criteria that must be met in order for a consumer to qualify to receive the promotional materials. Criteria may include but are not limited:

1. Gender;
2. Age;

3. Marital status;
4. Level of education;
5. Number and ages of children;
6. Household or personal income;
7. Residence (rent/own/other);
8. Type of pets in the household;
9. Shopping preferences;
10. Product preferences;
11. Brand preferences;
12. Shopping frequency;
13. City;
14. State;
15. Zip Code (in lieu of City/State);
16. Area code;
17. Phone extension number (first 3 digits of phone number);
18. Type of products owned (DVD, PDA, personal computer, and the like);
19. Other demographic items (no limit to number of items);
20. Other consumer preferences (no limit to number of items);
21. Consumer's shopping or purchase history; and
22. Other consumer data.

The Select Criteria 211 may further include (1) the minimum and maximum age of the targeted consumer, (2) the maximum number of recipients to be targeted, (3) duplication criteria to prevent consumers from receiving redundant promotional materials within a set period of time, (4) criteria priority settings for the purpose of prioritizing the rank or relationship of the criteria, and (5) any other

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data which may be beneficial in distributing promotional data from the promoter to the consumer.

A promoter uses querying means 212 to interrogate the relational database of database means 260. The query is conducted automatically and without the assistance or intervention of the promoter. The database means 260 includes a relational database that comprises all of the personal demographic and other information provided by the participating consumers as well as information of the participating consumers provided by third parties 270.

The establishing means takes the results of the query 214 to form a list of consumers to receive the promotional material specified in the TCP 207, the list including a representative consumer having a "consumer identification" 215. The promoter-generated promotional material 216 are then generated 241, either in printed or electronic form, and subsequently delivered 242 to the each of the consumers. That is, the promoter's promotional materials 216 may also be sent without the receiving consumer specifically requesting the promotional materials and the delivery interval may be intermittent or uniformly spaced, where the delivery characteristic may be defined by the consumer, host or promoter. The host 130 may use tracking means 290 including a relational database to track successive coupon distributions in order to minimize the targeted prospective customers receipt of duplicate coupons.

In addition to receiving the promotional materials subject to the criteria of the promoters, the consumer may also request, via interfacing means, specific promotional materials of interest from the promoters participating in the Promotional Data Delivery service. A consumer makes such a request by accessing the consumer main page 221, which is accessible from the consumer computer via the Internet. The host computer system consumer interfacing means includes various web pages, links, and forms 222, including means for viewing promotional material and product information categorized according to promoter name 223, item category 224 and product brand name 225. From the various pages, links, and search methods 222, a consumer can view product descriptions 226 retrieved from the host computer.

The host system consumer interfacing means may also include registering means for the consumer to subscribe via registration or login 227. FIG. 3 illustrates the login procedure 227 in detail whereby the host computer 130 receives, in response to profiling queries, consumer identification data 310, consumer demographic information 320 and consumer authorization 330 to participate in the Promotional Data Delivery service. In the course of registering with the host, a consumer can affirmatively consent to receive one or more promoter-generated promotional materials without the consumer (1) contemporaneously requesting specific promotional materials and (2) necessarily authorizing each distribution of promotional materials on a per-transaction basis.

Returning to FIG. 2, it is after login that the consumer may then use selecting means 228 to request delivery of particular promotional materials predefined by the promoters at the PM 208. One or more selected promotional materials' identification numbers are then sent to the host computer 120 as consumer-requested promotional materials 232. Additionally, an email or other type of notification will also be generated automatically and forwarded to the promoter, data entry person, or other interested party; it will detail the data submitted in the Query 212, and is an acknowledgement (receipt) of the activity. An email or other type of notification may also be generated to display the Query Results 214.

The list of promotional materials requested by the consumer are preferably summarized 230 for the consumer and thereafter the consumer may logout 231. The consumer-requested promotional materials 232 are combined 240, if applicable, with any promoter-generated promotional material 216. The combination of promotional materials 240 is then collectively generated 241 and delivered 242 to the individual consumer. The combined promotional materials 260 each can include elements typically found in a coupon, such as:

1. coupon bar code;
2. extended bar code;
3. human-readable bar code;
4. offer code;
5. description of products required to be purchased;
6. value of coupon;

7. expiration date;
8. images;
9. legal text for the consumer;
10. legal text for the retailer;
11. consumer identification codes, including serial number and bar code representations of serial numbers, used by the promoter to assess individual purchasing habits, redemption rates and the effectiveness of the target profile; and
12. Any other data requested to be distributed by the promoter.

If printed by a host printing device, the promotional materials are mailed directly to the consumer while the electronic promotional materials may be transmitted by telefacsimile, web page, email, email attachment or equivalent means to the consumer for subsequent printing or redemption.

ALTERNATIVE EMBODIMENT

In an alternative embodiment, the promotional materials may be delivered 242 to a consumer in an electronic document (email, email attachment, web page, telefacsimile, and the like) on behalf of a retailer or the manufacturer of products sold by a retailer. A consumer in receipt of the electronic document can be: (a) within the retailer's geographic area; (b) a directed recipient of the retailer; or (c) in some other commercial connection between the retailer, manufacturer, consumer, and third party. The manufacturer has the ability to use interfacing means 203

to select consumer criteria 211 (e.g., demographics, shopping history, and the like) of the consumers best suited to receive their promotional data contained in the electronic document. Additionally, the manufacturer may authorize the one or more participating retailers to offer a purchase incentive to the targeted consumers. Terms of the purchase incentive are described in detail on the electronic document, and may include promotional text and images. Redemption of the manufacturer promotion must be performed at the retailer who is sponsoring the delivery of the electronic document to the consumer. The delivery means 242 of the alternative embodiment has a two-part delivery. That is, each consumer who receives the manufacturer's purchase incentive will also have an electronic representation of that offer reside in the retailer's database.

Also in the above alternative embodiment, the consumer is instructed to create a hardcopy printout of the electronic document, which will then be brought to the retailer. The printed document contains bar coding that is both unique to each consumer and readable by the retailer's point-of-sale scanner to identify the particular consumer. Upon scanning, the retailer's database can then associate this unique consumer to the offers delivered via the electronic document. For every match of products purchased and discount offered, the discount will be subtracted from the total point-of-sale purchase and the database will be updated to reflect the product purchased and the discount given. This information can then be transmitted to the

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manufacturer for reconciliation. In addition to manufacturer promotional data, the electronic document, as part of the query results 214, may also include retailer-specific promotional data, treated as an extension of the producer generated PM 216, including, but not limited to: details of the retailer's in-store promotions; beginning and end dates of in-store promotions; images of the items on sale; the retailer's corporate information; retail industry news; health and fitness news; recipes; shopping tips; and any other news or information the retailer desires to distribute to the consumer.

While certain exemplary embodiments have been described and shown in the accompanying drawings, it is to be understood that such embodiments are merely illustrative of and not restrictive on the broad invention. The scope of each claim term is not limited to the specific constructions and arrangements shown and described, since various other modifications may occur to those ordinarily skilled in the art.

Therefore, the invention has been disclosed by way of example and not limitation, and reference should be made to the following claims to determine the scope of the present invention.